



A look upon the cinematographic gaze: a reading of *Les quatre cent coups*

Um olhar sobre o olhar cinematográfico: uma leitura de *Les quatre cent coups*

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Abstract: The concept of montage appropriated by Walter Benjamin from cinema constitutes, in the context of a cognitive crisis that accompanies the consolidation of capitalist modernity, a formal model that, according to the author, enables the reestablishment of the experience. From the mentioned concept, associated to the distancing between subject and object, we propose a reading of the film *Les quatre cent coups* (François Truffaut, 1959), in particular about the freezing of the final shot associated to the transgressive look of the character Antoine Doinel, whose eyes cause estrangement when crossing the spectators.

Keywords: cinema; montage; modernity; distancing.

Resumo: O conceito de montagem apropriado por Walter Benjamin a partir do cinema constitui, no contexto de uma crise cognitiva que acompanha a consolidação da modernidade capitalista, um modelo formal que, segundo o autor, permite restabelecer a experiência. A partir do referido conceito, associado ao distanciamento entre o sujeito e o objeto, propomos uma leitura do filme *Les quatre cent coups* (François Truffaut, 1959), sobretudo do congelamento do quadro final associado ao olhar transgressor do personagem Antoine Doinel, cujos olhos causam estranhamento ao cruzarem os do espectador.

Palavras-chave: cinema; montagem; modernidade; distanciamento.

A gaze that constrains and undresses us, transposing a constellation of factors that imprint themselves inside the eyeball as it achieves our eyes, is expressed in the eyes of a character – Antoine Doinel – of the film **Les quatre cents coups**. Antoine represents a recurrent modern character, constantly questioning his limits, in a film which tries to capture a Paris in which the Eiffel Tower, structured upon the progress dreams of modernity, figures as the

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background around which the city raises, as if it was awoken from these dreams.

At the end of the film – scene analyzed in this paper – Antoine runs towards the sea as his eyes contemplate it. Just like the flux and reflux of waves, Antoine turns himself towards the beach with his eyes against ours, glaring at us at the same time that his image is fixed on a portrait – and cinema becomes photography. When Antoine's eyes contemplate the sea and, consequently, the game of the flux and reflux of waves, the sea is not simply the privileged object of an isolated visual fullness, like contemplated by a modern character analyzed by Georges Didi-Huberman (1998). Notwithstanding, the moment in which Antoine's eyes look at ours, same moment in which the movement of the film is interrupted, refers to another, which is when the flux of life is diked, immobilizing itself, so that this interruption is lived as if it were a reflux: the astonishment is this reflux (Benjamin, 1994, p. 89).

According to Walter Benjamin, montage, as a formal principle, allows us to reconstruct the experience, made impracticable after the consolidation of the capitalist modes of production, allowing vision for reflection. For Benjamin, montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted and thus counteracts illusion (BUCK-MORSS, 2002, p. 97). A cognitive crisis, including that of the perceptive subject originated from a place in modernity in which the subject problematizes what he is, sets itself in late capitalism, promoting a disintegration of perception, so that the capital becomes a system of attention and distraction, terms used by Benjamin (1989, p. 69) to describe the modern experience, and, furthermore, a fundamental change in the relationship between subject and object (CRARY, 2001, p. 69).

Benjamin praises the cognitive potential of the cultural experience technologically mediated, mainly the cinemas, so much that he comprehends that art's role is "to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation" (BUCK-MORSS, 1996, p. 5) through new technologies. "The technical apparatus of the camera, incapable of 'returning our gaze'", as stated by Susan Buck-Morss (1996, p. 12), apprehends the indifference of the eyes

that face it, “eyes that ‘have lost their ability to look’” (Buck-Morss, 1996, p. 18). However, the assimilation of the experience through technology returns your sensitivity in case the shock is apprehended (CRARY, 2001, p. 24).

For Benjamin, images themselves – the suspended dialectic – are like shots of a camera, that ‘reveal’ in time, despite the future has developers active enough to bring these plates perfectly out. Therefore, those images should be juxtaposed as in a film, pointing to a capacity of shock of those images juxtaposed in order to provoke the revolutionary awakening (BUCK-MORSS, 2002, p. 298-300). Thus, if the industrialization causes a crisis in the perception for the acceleration of time and for the fragmentation of the space, the film shows a potential cure when decelerates time, after all, the moment in which establishes now the reception of the film constitutes a moment that the cognitive reception ceases to be contemplative, but connected to action (CRARY, 2001, p. 323).

Through a cognitive procedure similar to montage, capable to reconstitute the experience derived from the overlapping of images, we intend to unveil Antoine’s gaze. For that, let us return to the moment in which his eyes gaze at ours, consolidating the previous scene in which, while he is being photographed, Antoine seems to be prevented from looking at the spectator by the character who operates the objective, potentializing the mediation of the apparatus between the two gazes.

Table 1: Antoine is photographed

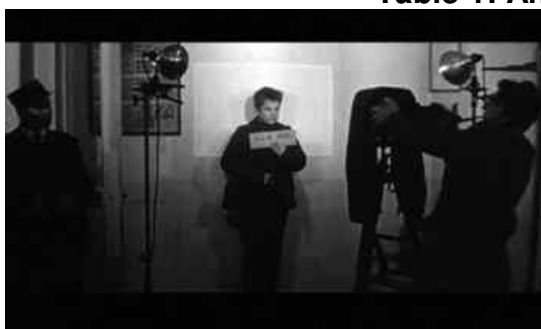


Fig 1: Antoine and the photographer.



Fig 2: Antoine looks at the camera



Fig 3: The photographer interfere.



Fig 4: Antoine is prevented from looking at us

At the moment in which the movement of the film is interrupted, it refers to another, which is when the flux of life is diked, immobilizing itself, so that this interruption is lived as if it were a reflux: the astonishment is this reflux.

The astonishment mentioned by Benjamin (1994, p. 80) relates to the concepts of interruption of the action, or the effect of the interruption delay, and of distancing, associated with the brechtian theater. According to Benjamin, the brechtian theater conserves the conscience of being theater, allowing to experimentally order the elements of reality. At the end of the process the conditions represented appear, away from the spectator, who astonishingly recognizes them as real.

The brechtian theater – which the main role of the *mise-èn-scene* is to express the relationship between the action represented and the action of the act of representation itself – discovers, therefore, the conditions, by means of the interruption of events. The brechtian theater allows the conditions to criticize each other, mediatically and dialectically, opposing one to another their various elements and revealing contradictions of social order.

According to Benjamin (1994, p. 84), nothing prevents to attribute more reality to the character than the represented character, putting the represented against the real. Thus, the impact provoked by that process corresponds, as the confrontation with the spectator puts him against himself, to the effect produced by Antoine's gaze. Gazing at the spectator, establishes him as another, yet not allowing identification, but contradiction, denouncing another sensitivity, which is the subject who gazes.

Therefore, it is possible to suppose that, as in the brechtian theater, the action interruption intends to activate the spectator and, by means of the effect

of distancing, convince him about the need for intervention in the movement that allows us to become and our object condition of our critical judgment:

A teoria do distanciamento é, em si mesmo dialética. (...) O distanciamento passa então a ser negação da negação; leva através do choque do não-conhecer ao choque do conhecer. Trata-se de um acúmulo de incompreensibilidade até que surja a compreensão. Tornar estranho é, portanto, ao mesmo tempo tornar conhecido. A função do distanciamento é a de se anular a si mesma (ROSENFELD, 2000, p. 152).

In Brecht's words, to take distance is to see in historical terms, which implies the deployment in subject and object (ROSENFELD, 2000, p. 155-160). For that, people appeal to a model that allows examination of the relationship between the bourgeois conscience and material social conditions, demonstrating the limits of bourgeois theories towards knowing reality. The objective reality demonstrates the falsehood of the kantian premise of the subject's duality and object, so that the idealism coincides with the problem of the merchandise – the reification.

The notion that the merchandise structure prints itself on the material, results in understanding that the material, at least according to Theodor W. Adorno, comprehends the problems of society, so that the intellectual and the artist, while dealing with the technical problems of their discipline, treat, undirectally, the problems of social totality (BUCK-MORSS, 1981, p. 90). Against the conditioning resulted from the automatism that causes inability to comprehend, Adorno proposes a process of denaturalization allowed by the insertion of the subject in the universe of production.

According to Adorno (1989), the discussion of the artist with the material represents a discussion with society, since the auto movement of the material – which is dialectical – develops in the same direction as the real society. For that, a subversion that consists on the change of function of the expression of a given art through shocks that are registered in their material means, attacking the taboos of form, rationalizing and transposing them into images, testifies the powerlessness of man, while the shocks convert

themselves in the technical law of form, prohibiting all kinds of continuity and development.

In spite of the divergences between Adorno and Benjamin, both seem to agree as for the role of interruption, as a form of stopping the time or reaching the past, the forgotten time, to break the placid surface of the present into pieces, as Susan Buck-Morss (2001) suggests. Buck-Morss makes responsible the means of art exactly for their opacity, means as end in themselves, what does not allow Art to be reduced to information, justifying its power and its impotence, as a means, at least, of returning the use-value completely to the value subsumed for the exchange value.

After all, when Benjamin (1994, p. 174) writes that modern society constitutes the antithesis of the primitive society because of its technical emancipation, and that emancipated technique confronts with modern society as a way of second nature, not less elementary than primitive society, proved by wars and economic crisis, it refers exactly to a regression, because the reproduction is invariably characterized by the transitoriness and repeatability, causing a dehumanization, while being defrauded of the experience turned out generalized state. And Adorno's lesson, in turn, consists exactly in that progress can always represent a regression to barbarism.

On the other hand, Adorno accepts a possibility for the cinema, even being ideologically committed, to act in a liberating way on the people through a subversive appropriation of their models. And therefore understands an immediate connection to the social context by means of reproduction of images: "A estética do filme é, portanto, imanentemente social em virtude de sua posição para com a realidade externa" (DUARTE, 2003, p. 142-3) but, for that, Adorno believes that the establishment of a filmic aesthetic to the extent of its object implies searching for the bond that links photographed images in movement with the same movement of consciousness, with interiority conscient of itself, in a way that Adorno establishes a delimited line between cinema as art and as mere product of culture industry from the possibility that he has of externalizing the images of memory as an imagetic liberating way of writing.

In spite of understanding that the eye plays a role of adaptation of a rational and bourgeois order when noticing the reality as composed of goods, Adorno associates the sense of the vision to a human attitude returned for the progress, for the explanation, that, however, recedes with the culture influenced starting from a deconceptualization of the visual language. Therefore, the culture industry preserves a “aura em decomposição”, as it offers an impression of “estabilidade social e valorização do capital” (DUARTE, 2003, p. 118-33).

Nevertheless, the interruption of the movement of images of the film analyzed, which constitutes, “antes de tudo, fotografias (...) postas em movimento” (DUARTE, 2003, p. 137), highlights the static aspect of the situation. In this way, the film refers to the concept of “demystification” of the brechtian theater, i.e. revelation that social conditions are historical and, therefore, may be exceeded (ROSENFELD, 2000, p. 150). If in the brechtian theater the spectator is requested to solve the problems of the play, Antoine's eyes do not request something different in the film.

The breaking of the action in the film happens formally through the interruption of the movement that characterizes the cinema, so that the final sequence, only with two cuts, is stopped and closed in Antoine's face, as a photograph, understood as a way of stopping the time, capable of raising a singular experience and, in that way, producing a vision.¹

Table 2: Final sequence



Fig 5: Antoine runs.



Fig 6: Lap dissolve from shot 1 to 2.



Fig 7: Antoine runs down a cliff.



Fig 8: The view from the sea.



Fig 9: Antoine glances at the sea.



Fig 10: Cut. Antoine runs down a stairway.



Fig 11: Antoine steps on the water.



Fig 12: Antoine arrives on the sea.



Fig 13: The image freezes.



Fig 14: Close-up.

The movement interruption in the gaze of the character suggests, at the same time, a state of distraction, referring to the problem of attention, a crucial component of modernity. If Antoine's eyes do not contemplate for themselves the ephemerality of the attention as productive component of the modernity, they contemplate in itself the eye not fasten that it is always in the fold between

the attention and the amusement, i.e. the spectator's eye, contemplated in the character's eyes in the moment of the momentary freezing of the vision, temporary immobilization in a flow economy and amusement permanently installed, revealing an impossible present of being apprehended (CRARY, 2001, p. 85-6).

While the paralyzed movement suggests an appropriate look at the photograph, the film refers to problems proposed from the language of photography. After all, photography demonstrates that the human eye perceives differently the inhumane eye (BUCK-MORSS, 2002, p. 170), and the film potentiates the power to reveal their human context by setting it in movement, which makes it capable of revealing the unconscious optical that escapes our eyes.

The gaze – as a means of desire – suggests a tactility linked to the performance of a role tactile, pertaining to the fact that the vision if brood always with the ineluctable volume of human bodies, as stated Didi-Huberman (1998, p. 30). However, Bataille (1968, p. 14) suggests a relationship between death and sexual excitation. For the author, the fundamental reason of reproduction continues to be the key to eroticism, between a being and other beings there is a discontinuity, so that we try to communicate but no communication between us can suppress a primatial difference that lies on the incommunicability of death. Although we can share the feel of the vertigo of this abyss.

The relationship between eroticism and death is inferred of Antoine's eyes as they refer to the eyes of the objectified beings – object of desire – in erotic photographs or films, whose eyes look at us in the eye, intermediated by the technology. The look derived from the reversal of scopophilic drive, as Willemen (1996, p. 212), induces shame at spectator at the moment that the voyeur pleasure becomes discomforting. The reestablishment of the relationship between eroticism and death rightly seeks uphold the truth that man may exceed the arriving, can look at it front, as ensures Bataille (1968) while trying to understand the horror to the eye which characterizes the civilized man, the eye that, according to the author, could be associated with the filmic cut, and that, despite, fulfill the function of erotic vision. In Bataille's novel *Story of*

the eye, facing the state of absence of limits, death appears as the sole exit for their tragic eroticism (MORAES apud BATAILLE, 2003, p. 17-20).

That relationship still raises other problems associated with the cognitive crisis that is configured in the capitalist modernity. The process of fusion, understood by Bataille as the conciliation between subject and object, that describes the cognitive process intended by Benjamin, relates with the movement of the beings' dissolution proposed by Bataille (1968, p. 18) as fusion in which the two beings confuse themselves, implicating subject and object. For that, the decisive action is the undressing, since the nakedness opposes the closed state, i.e. the state of discontinuous existence, equivalent to a violent death.

However, the relationship between eroticism and death does not complete itself without considering that modern eroticism dissolves the frontiers between the organic and the inorganic worlds. Like fashion that, as a means that seduces sex to the inorganic, the domain of the dead things, that relation prostitutes the living body degrading it to inorganic world. Is the dialectical station of exchange between woman and merchandise – the desire and the dead body that Buck-Morss (2002, p. 135) says. Benjamin states that the prostitute represents the emblem of capitalism, associating her to the employed person who sells himself/herself to survive, so that the prostitute summarizes the form and content of the merchandise. She is at the same time merchandise and sale. Prostitution represents the verification that for modernity the woman becomes mass product for modernity, only a type so repetitive of the industrial city like the merchandise-woman.

The twisted eye – object of Bataille's philosophy – confuses, thus, with Antoine's gaze: twisted with enjoyment obtained with the vision of our own destruction. They combine in Antoine's eyes, thus, eyes of exhausted senses with the eyes of the object woman, who disappears before the potency of astonishment of the photograph, which reveals the erotic power of a null world, as Baudrillard (1997, p. 34-35). The eyes of the object women reflect a disenchanting simulation: the porn – more real than real – this is the maximum of the simulation, according to Jean Baudrillard (1997, p. 13-23). Object whose

eyes simulate the orgasm while, to simulate is to pretend what you do not have, referring to an emptiness that questions the difference between “real” and “false”.

The object that looks at us while we look at it shows the means by which it can be violated. But its eyes are opaque and incapable to reflect the one who looks. The eyes of the naked body request the touch made impossible by the intermediacy of technology, which does not even reflects the other’s nakedness. On the other hand, other eyes reflect ours while the character’s condition is projected, turning it common to all the humanity. The object that looks at us allows us to see looking: the spectator shifts to the character’s place, whose immobility reflects the spectator’s impotence. So that, the object constitutes, simultaneously, the subject.

The referred condition appears represented through a suspension of movement, while the time remains in movement, so that the images of the photographs put in motion are other but are the same. The suspension of the movement corresponds to the moment of suspension of the staging. The eye in the eye reveals that “reality” is nothing but staged world, what the spectator recognizes as another modality of “astonishment” mentioned by Benjamin. The mentioned moment coincides with the summit of the dramatic nature printed in the photograph, according to Baudrillard (1997, p. 33):

Pelo seu silêncio, pela sua imobilidade. É o que sonham as coisas, é o que nós sonhamos, não o movimento, é esta imobilidade mais intensa. Força da imagem imóvel, força da ópera mítica. O próprio cinema cultiva o mito da câmera lenta e do congelamento como o ponto mais alto da dramaticidade.

The awakening of a displacement in the way of looking - what really matters for the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction - implies in considering that the nature driven to the camera is not the same driven to the gaze, because “it penetrates deeply’ in the material”, which “is covered of political importance, for the world that opens up to the camera propitiates relevant knowledge to operate in it”, so that the cinema makes us gleam, in one hand, the many conditionings that determine our existence, on the other hand,

certifies us a large and unsuspected space of freedom. (BUCK-MORSS, 2002, p. 320).

For that, a montage procedure like cinema's allows us to perceive in Antoine's eyes the empty eyes that do not return your look and, at the same time, what Benjamin anticipates as what provides the aura by means in which returns the look, conception from which Georges Didi-Huberman (1998, p. 29) develops the truth that what we see worths – lives – only by what looks at us.

Didi-Huberman (1998) stipulates two possibilities combined to the act of looking, which are "to have" or "to be". The first would be more properly associated with the desire raised by the eye, while the second, when to look is to feel that something inevitably escapes us; that is: when to look is to lose. This modality of vision relates to an object which shows the loss, destruction, the disappearance of objects or bodies. The emptiness that Antoine's eyes reveal apprehends what looks at us – death: the destiny of the body similar to mine, emptied of its life, its speech, its movements, emptied of its power to raise its eyes towards me.

Furthermore, however, the attitude of denying what looks at us in what we see, understood by Didi-Huberman (1998) as the power of language upon the look, seems impossible, for what signifies recognizing what looks at us constitutes only a film is anticipated by the distancing evoked by the eye. That way, indifference, in other words, the object's auras refusal through the ostentation of an indifference way as for what hides in the gaze, seems unsettled for the similarity of what looks at us. What looks at us in what we look to the character's eyes seems doubled by the inscription of the word *fin* at the end of the film, because it is the end what we see in what looks at us, the end of the film with the glance in our eyes: "o que é visto, aqui, sempre se prevê; e o que se prevê sempre está associado a um fim dos tempos: um dia – um dia em que a noção de dia, como a de noite, terá caducado" (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 1998, p. 48).

Table 3: The end

Fig 15: The end.

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Filmography

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